

## **Five Times Jonathan Byers Helped Steve Harrington, and the One Time Steve Helped...Nearly Everyone by MortalThread**

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**Summary:**

It's not like Steve expected to find friendship in Jonathan Byers...But then again...

# Five Times Jonathan Byers Helped Steve Harrington, and the One Time Steve Helped...Nearly Everyone

## Author's Note:

- For [BigBadLittleRed](#).

Welcome to the first fic I have ever posted on here. EVER. Props go out to BigBadLittleRed, who was my first friend in the fandom, and who lets me scream about everything.

Enjoy!

1.

Chemistry class is definitely not Steve Harrington's forte. He's come to grips with this in the four years he's spent in high school, and as he stares at the beakers and Bunsen burner in front of him, textbook open and experiment sheet on the lab table, he's entirely certain he has no idea what he's doing.

Jonathan is sitting next to him, partnered up and furiously flipping pages in his textbook. The goggles are on top of his head, pushing the blond bangs from his eyes and Steve casually scans his notebook and then the sheet.

"So...what are we doing again?"

Jonathan doesn't pause in his flipping pages, and shrugs.

"Chemical reaction," he offers simply.

Steve nods, purses his lips, and blows exasperatedly through them. He fiddles with the goggles, then tries to fit them over his head. They're tight, and he takes them off to readjust the elastic band. Next to him, Jonathan lets out a huff, and slaps the book shut. He leans over, grabbing the sheet from Steve, and Steve leans back,

allowing him to slide across. His stool starts to tip and he falls forward fast, colliding with Jonathan's shoulder.

"Sorry, sorry!"

"You're okay."

Steve only nods, clears his throat, and sticks his pen behind his ear. The room is loud as students talk out the experiment, and Steve hears a brief cry as something drops behind him. He looks over at Jonathan again, and leans forward on his elbows.

"So, uh. About last year--"

"Experiment, Steve."

"Yeah, we'll get to that. I just have to say this first, okay? I'm sorry I punched you. And what I said about your family and everything."

Jonathan doesn't look at him, setting up the beaker and lighting the burner. Steve sighs quietly.

"Seriously. I am."

Jonathan stills for a second, putting the one beaker down with one of the compounds in it. He drops his hands to the table and looks up, then looks at Steve. Steve sits up straight, turning to face him and squares himself a little. Jonathan searches his face. With his hair out of his eyes, Steve can see the unguarded expressions. The brown eyes search his face, and then his features relax. He nods.

"I'm sorry, too."

Steve breathes out a sigh of relief. His chest loosens a little, and he leans forward on the table, eyeing the sheet again. Jonathan hands him a beaker.

"Fill that with the green stuff. Up to the third line."

Steve nods, reaching forward. Jonathan is jotting something down on the paper, and Steve carefully pours the green liquid into

the beaker.

“So, let me ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“Would you wanna hang out some time?”

Jonathan shrugs, not looking up from the paper. “With you?”

“Catch a movie or something.”

“I work at the theater.”

Steve huffs. “Okay, what about at my house? Dinner? I don’t know. Anywhere.”

Jonathan looks up, taps his pencil against the textbook.

At that moment, Steve feels the one beaker slip in his fingers and he dives for it. He misses, and the glass shatters on the linoleum floor. He curses quietly, leaning down, feeling the eyes of the other students on him, and he slides off the stool. Jonathan leans down beside him, carefully avoiding the glass.

“Why?”

Steve glances up as he mops the green liquid with some paper towels he’s handed by the teacher.

“I could use some new friends, honestly.”

Jonathan smirks a little and Steve offers him a small smile.

Something sharp bites into his palm.

“Ah, shit.”

“Let me see, let me see,” Jonathan says, holding out his hand.

Blood is sluggishly making its way down Steve’s wrist, and he curses as he sees the shard of glass embedded in his palm. He stands, offering his hand to Jonathan. Jonathan wraps warm fingers around

his wrist, and tugs him over to the sink in the corner of the room. Steve follows him, feeling eyes on him again, and he ducks his head as Jonathan starts the water. He shoves Steve's hand under the faucet, then says something quietly to the teacher. She walks away, glancing back at them. He lets the water run over his hand for a moment, wincing at the stinging, then pulls it away from the tap. Jonathan turns back to the faucet, then looks at Steve's hand. He pulls away, washing his hands, and Steve immediately misses the warmth. Cooler fingers return to his palm, and Jonathan gives him a serious look.

"Ready?"

"For what?"

Steve bites his tongue and whimpers (a manly whimper), as Jonathan yanks the shard out.

"Fuuuuuck, warn a guy, man. Jesus."

Jonathan laughs, and Steve, although in pain, feels himself start to laugh with him.

"Christ, that hurts."

Jonathan presses a paper towel to his hand, staunching the blood flow, and he digs around in the plastic basket by the sink for something. He pulls out a roll of tape, slaps some gauze on his hand, and then begins to wrap it. Steve waits, looking around. The students are all busy with their projects, and he looks at Jonathan.

"Thanks."

"Yeah. You're welcome."

He flexes his hand when he's done, feels the pull of his skin against the tape, and nods. It's still throbbing, but it's better. He waits as Jonathan cleans up the bandages and he turns to head back to the lab table. He stops when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

"And I'd love to hang out sometime."

Steve beams, and watches as Jonathan ducks his head. Steve doesn't miss the blush that appears near his ears, and he blows out a breath.

"Let's go finish this. I need a cigarette."

2.

Steve tries desperately to drown out his parents having an argument downstairs. He rolls over on his bed, finding himself face to face with large green squares of plaid and he groans, shoving a pillow over his head. Something shatters downstairs and he sits up. He hears his mother crying and his father yelling. There're angry footsteps on the stairway and he bolts up, locking his door. The footsteps pass by his room, and he hears more footsteps following. It's his mother, continuing the argument upstairs. He can't make out what she's yelling about, but he sits down on the edge of his bed, and glances at his shoes and jacket. He looks at his window, and then-

Makes up his mind.

Fifteen minutes later, he finds himself in front of the Byers' house. He sees Jonathan's car in the driveway, and the soft lights inside. He hears tinny music coming from the side of the house, and he briefly turns toward Nancy's direction. He curses when he remembers she's not home, and then turns back toward his house. He can't hurry away fast enough when he hears the Byers' door open and the rustling of a trash bag.

"Steve?"

He turns, seeing Will struggling with a trash bag bigger than he is, and he offers him a weak smile.

"Hey, Lil' Byers."

“What are you doing out here?” Will asks, tossing the lid from the metal trash can onto the lawn. It’s dark, and cold, and Steve sees him shiver a little. He jogs forward to help as Will attempts to throw the bag into the can, and helps him lift it in.

“I was out for a walk.”

“Oh. You wanna come in? Jonathan’s home.”

Steve shakes his head. “Nah, man, I’m gonna-“

“We’re about to eat dinner. Why don’t you eat with us? Did you eat already?”

Steve smiles at the persistent questions, and ruffles the kid’s hair.

“I’m okay.”

Will only sighs, looking so much like his brother, Steve realizes, and then jerks a little as cold, small fingers wrap around his wrist and start to tug him back toward the house.

“JONATHAN! I FOUND STEVE OUTSIDE.”

Steve doesn’t want to yank the kid back as he’s dragged into the house and he sees Jonathan at the stove looking in bewilderment at them. He gives him a short, limp wave.

“Hi.”

“Uh, yeah. Hi. Will, what did I tell you about strays?”

Steve huffs a soft laugh as Will rolls his eyes, and then flops into a chair at the table.

“He’s staying for dinner.”

Jonathan turns from the stove. “Oh is he now?”

“Yeah.”

“Steve, did you *want* to stay for dinner or did Will *make* you

stay for dinner?”

Steve glances at Will, who only nods at him, and he looks back at Jonathan.

“Made. Definitely made.”

Will mutters a soft “traitor” under his breath and Jonathan laughs.

“Have a seat, then. Take off your coat.”

Steve finds a seat at the table, and takes in the homey surroundings. He realizes he hasn’t been here since “The Incident” and he glances at the wall in the living room, noticing it’s been patched up. The Christmas lights are still up all over the ceiling, and he looks around. The house smells warm, unlike his own, and there’s a hint of cedar and smoke from Joyce’s cigarettes in the air. He breathes in deeply for a moment, and when he looks across, he sees Will just looking at him. He seems to be studying him, pushing his cheek into a fist, elbow on the table. He’s eyeing him intently.

“What?”

Will flops at a hand at him. “How do you get your hair to do that?”

Jonathan drops something by the stove and starts laughing.

Steve feels himself flush a little.

“A lot of gel, little man. A lot of gel.”

Will seems satisfied with the answer and Jonathan sets a pot down on the table. He puts a bowl and spoon in front of Steve, and Steve immediately smells some kind of stew. It smells amazing, and he glances up at Jonathan.

“Need any help?”

“Nope. We’re all good here, but thanks.”



Steve watches as he sits and Will dives for the ladle sticking out of the pot. He pours some of the stew into his bowl and then dumps a copious amount of salt on it.

“Easy on the salt, Will. Jesus. I put some in it.”

“You never put enough in it, *Jonathan*.”

Steve smirks at the exchange and then laughs as Jonathan leans over and shoves at him lightly. Will pushes the ladle toward Steve and gestures to the stew.

He grabs the handle, and then pours himself a bowl. He’s hit with steam, and the smell of something homemade reminds him of his grandmother for a moment.

“Smells good. Didn’t know you cooked.”

Jonathan is in the process of shoving his own spoon into his mouth, and he only bobs his head at him. Steve takes up his spoon, and finds a beef cube and blows on it. He takes a bite.

“Jesus Christ, man. This is incredible.”

Jonathan only smiles at him and shrugs. “Old recipe.”

“Damn, this is good. Seriously.”

“Mom’s not so good at cooking, but I seem to have some kind of knack for it.”

“Mom suuucks at cooking,” Will quips and Jonathan shoots him a look.

“Be nice.” Will quiets, but slurps at the stew and Jonathan throws a napkin at him. “Eat like a human, please.”

Steve finds himself relaxing in the atmosphere. He knows he’s looking at something private, familial, and he feels suddenly very at home.

“Plenty more if you want seconds.”

Steve nods, scoops out another portion, and Jonathan waves a hand in the air, mouth still full, and stands. He grabs a loaf of bread by the toaster and sets it on the table.

“Goes good with the sauce.”

Steve grabs a slice, and dunks it in the sauce. Jonathan’s right, and he nods at him. Will gets up, and goes over to the fridge.

“Drinks?”

Steve nods, and Jonathan gestures to the tap. “Water.”

“Steve?”

“Whatever is fine.”

“You like Coke?”

“Sure.”

A can is set in front of him and he takes a moment to savor the potatoes and beef. He finds a few bits of celery and just nods.

“Seriously, I want the recipe for this.”

“I’d have to kill you,” Jonathan deadpans.

Steve places a hand over his heart.

“Jonathan Byers, you’d kill me? Over a recipe?”

Will laughs across the table, and Jonathan rolls his eyes at him, but Steve sees the beginning of a smirk.

“Fine, fine. You can have the recipe.”

Steve smiles, watching him for a moment, stirring his stew around. He notices the dimples for the first time, the deep lines around his mouth as Jonathan laughs at something Will said and he suddenly feels a loss for a brother he never had.

“You okay?”

Steve clears his throat, offering him another smile. "Yeah, yeah. Fine. This is...thanks for letting me have dinner with you guys."

Jonathan warily eyes him, concern in his features. "What brings you out here?"

"I was on a walk."

Jonathan goes to ask him something, but then looks at Will, who's now got a book on the table. Jonathan waves a hand at it, reaching across to shove it away. He can't reach it, so he flaps a hand in the air at it.

"No D and D at the table."

*"But it's played on a table."*

"Not during dinner, dingus."

Steve snorts as Will shakes his head. Steve sops up the last of the sauce with his bread and watches as Jonathan wipes his hands and mouth and then picks up the bowls. He looks into the pot, and then grabs a Tupperware out of the cabinet.

"I'm going to take a quick shower. You guys okay out here?"

Steve watches as he pours the remaining stew into the container and nods. "Yeah, should be fine."

"I'll be back in a bit."

Steve is suddenly alone with Will, and he sees him crack the book open again. He's intently looking through it, paging through colorful pictures and long pages of text.

"What's that?"

Will looks up at him, eyes wide. "Dungeons and Dragons book. You ever played?"

Steve shakes his head.

Will grabs the book and moves over a seat. He lays the book out in front of Steve and flips to a page with something that looks like the monster that had appeared in the Byers' home months before. He slaps a finger on the page.

"That's the Demogorgon."

Steve sits up and looks at the page, reading the blurb under the picture.

"Looks like that thing."

"Does, doesn't it?"

Steve eyes Will. "How are you after all that?"

Will seems to be surprised at the question. His eyes seem a little lost for a second, and he dips his head.

"I'm...I'm okay. I think," he whispers.

Steve squeezes his shoulder and Will offers him a small smile. "Just glad to be back, right?"

Will nods. "Yeah. Scary as hell in there."

"I'll bet." Steve squeezes his shoulder again. "Show me some more this."

Will lights up and flips to another page.

"Okay, so we have this new campaign--"

"What's a campaign?"

Will sighs. "This is gonna be a long night..."

Jonathan comes out of the bathroom in a waft of steam and the scent of shampoo and soap and Steve looks up from the table. He sees him toweling off his hair and dressed in soft sweats and an oversized sweatshirt. Steve sees him grin lightly at them, then

disappear into his room. Steve turns back to the table, nods as Will excitedly explains to him about...something, and smiles as Will uses the figurines that have suddenly appeared on the table to talk about some battle he and his friends had gone through. Steve lets it dawn on him that it sounds a lot like Will's experience. He leans back, raising his hands.

"Whoa whoa whoa. Is this how they found you?"

Will pauses, smiles a little. He's clasping the figurines tight in his fingers. "Exactly, almost. Pretty cool, huh?"

Steve laughs. "Yeah, actually. That's kind of awesome."

"Will, homework," Jonathan calls from down the hallway.

"Shit," Will whispers. Steve snorts, watching as Jonathan comes out and closes the book.

"Don't kill his brain too much. Sorry, Steve. He gets really into it."

"YOU USED TO PLAY!" Will yells.

Jonathan shrugs. "Yeah, well, homework."

Will sighs dramatically and pats Steve on the shoulder. He laughs and Jonathan shoos Will into his bedroom. He comes back out and sits down next to Steve.

"I'm glad he's back," Steve says softly.

"Me, too." Jonathan swipes a hand tiredly over his face, then tilts his head at Steve. "Want to listen to some music or something?"

"Sure, man."

"My room, then."

Steve abandons his can of Coke, and follows him down the hallway to his room. He steps over the char mark in the carpet and shudders at the memory.

“We’ve been meaning to rip that out.”

Steve stares at it for a moment, then follows him into the bedroom. He hadn’t really had a good look at it during The Incident and now he takes it in. Horror movies posters line the walls, there’s a desk by the window, and a turntable on the nightstand. A set of headphones and their snaking wire lead to the pillows, covered in threadbare pillow cases and the entire room is bathed in a light yellow light. A bookshelf is by the closet, and Steve sees a few clothes and shoes shoved into the corner of it. Jonathan is puttering around the room, moving books and notebooks off the bed. He shoves his backpack onto the desk and Steve sees a glimpse of the camera he and Nancy had given him.

“How’s the camera working?”

Jonathan looks up, then glances down at the desk. He picks the camera up and uncaps the lens. He lines up a shot and takes a picture of Steve faster than Steve can protest. He laughs.

“Works great. Thank you.”

“I’m glad, man. I am seriously sorry about all that.”

“I know. Which is why Nancy told me you bought it.”

Steve flushes, and Jonathan ducks his head. “I uh-“

“No, no. I appreciate it. I really do. What I did wasn’t good, and I had that coming. I kind of don’t blame you for it, in a way. You really didn’t have to replace it.”

Steve approaches the bed, sits carefully on the edge, and runs a hand through his hair.

“We both fucked up.”

“Yeah, we did.”

He feels the bed dip and turns, seeing Jonathan sitting up against the headboard. Soft music drifts from the turntable and he suddenly isn’t sure what to do with himself.

“So why are you really here tonight, Steve?”

Jonathan looks comfortable in his element, something Steve rarely sees. He’s usually tense, always ready to run, but here, he looks relaxed and loose. Open, even.

Steve clears his throat. “Parents were...uh...They fight a lot. Been worse lately. Sort of didn’t know where else to go.”

He runs a hand through his hair and moves upwards on the bed. He sits up against the headboard, shoulder to shoulder with him. He removes his shoes, placing them next to the bed and sinks back against the wall. He inhales deeply, finding the scent of Jonathan’s soap near him and a part of him takes comfort in it.

“Sorry to hear that, man.’

Steve waves a hand. “It’s fine. Just. Exhausting sometimes, you know. I don’t like being involved with their business and all, but mostly...seems the arguing is about me lately.”

He feels Jonathan turn toward him and looks, seeing him leaning his shoulder against the wall, head tilted to meet it.

“Why?”

Steve shrugs. He fiddles with the hem of his shirt. “Grades aren’t great, Dad wanted me to be a professional ball player, but I got kicked off the team this year. Replaced by some junior. Now he wants me to go to military school because I apparently lack discipline. Usual stuff, I guess.”

Steve waits for a moment, but Jonathan doesn’t say anything. He’s still watching him, Steve can feel his eyes on him, and he meets them.

“That sucks, man. Sorry,” Jonathan offers quietly.

“Yeah. Not looking forward to it. Not good enough to get into law school, or med school, so guess it’s military.”

“Have you tried a tutor? What did you need help in?”

Steve swings his head to face him and settles him with a look.

Jonathan huffs out a soft laugh. "I can help, if you need it."

Steve looks at him, doesn't find any mocking on his face, and nods.

"Yeah, man. Maybe. That might be good. Nancy is good and all, but—"

"Distracting?"

Steve gives him a wry look. "Yeah. Good word for it."

Jonathan nods knowingly, and Steve watches as he fiddles with a loose string on his pillowcase. He turns again after a moment, and Steve feels the warmth of his shoulder against him.

"We'll get you sorted," Jonathan says quietly.

"Thank you. I mean, after everything I put you through, Christ. I wouldn't help me."

"You're different now. Like, good different. And we both admit we fucked up, and I'd be willing to help you, I guess."

"Thanks, man. I mean it."

"Yeah, Steve. Any time."

They lapse into companionable silence, listening to the soft strains of music. They don't move, shoulders still touching, when Will loudly announces he's done with his homework and runs down the hallway, banging on the doorframe as he goes. Steve shuts his eyes briefly, sighing deeply.

This feels like the home he's always wanted.

"If you ever need to get away from the fighting, you're welcome here," Jonathan says quietly.

Steve looks at him, swallowing. He nearly jumps when



fingers close around his and he looks at Jonathan who's avoiding his eyes, but he can see the brown eyes are wide, and Steve watches as his throat works. He starts a few times, then doesn't speak. He goes to pull his fingers away, but Steve catches them, re-lacing his fingers through his. He clears his throat a little again, leans his head back and eyes Jonathan. He seems to be relaxing a little and finally, a quiet smile crosses his features. It's brief, and Steve feels his own smile beginning.

He's not sure how much time has passed, but Jonathan is breathing deeply and snoring quietly beside him, his head tilted close to Steve's shoulder. He glances at the clock, seeing how late it is, and finds his fingers till trapped in Jonathan's. He pulls gently, not wanting to wake him. He rolls off the bed carefully, slipping on his shoes and looks at the desk for a piece of paper. He writes him a note, thanking him for dinner and letting him hang out, and places it on the pillow beside Jonathan. He watches him for a moment, then drapes a blanket over his shoulders. He exits the room quietly, and closes the door behind him. He makes his way to the kitchen, grabbing his jacket. Will is sitting in the living room, watching some horror movie on TV and eating popcorn from a bowl.

"Jonathan fall asleep?"

Steve nods. "Yeah, I'm going to take off. Thanks for tonight and everything, little dude."

Will stands up, setting the bowl down and wipes his hands on his PJ pants.

"You should come to one of the campaigns. Mike's got an awesome one coming up."

"Maybe I'll do that."

"Hey, Steve?"

Steve turns, seeing Will directly in front of him as he reaches the door.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for hanging out with Jonathan. And me, but mostly him. He's been...I think he's lonely."

Steve swallows. "Yeah, I like your brother. He's cool. And you are, too."

Will beams at him for a moment, then steps forward, seemingly unsure. He only reaches Steve's chest, and before Steve knows it, Will is hugging him, skinny arms wrapped around his waist. He feels a jolt of something in his chest, and he reaches down, wrapping his arms around him. He's such a good kid, Steve thinks, and Steve glances up, seeing Jonathan looking out from his doorway. He's smiling at him, and he waves. Steve waves behind Will's back and he feels him pull away. He ruffles his hair.

"No more monsters, okay?"

"No promises."

Steve laughs, pats him on the shoulder, and then lets himself out. Will waves at him from the screen door and Steve waves back. He starts to head toward his house.

He feels better, he realizes, and when he steps into his own dark home, and falls into bed, finds he sleeps better that night than anything else, the feel of Jonathan's hand in his own and Will's hug still there the next morning.

3.

Steve blows his nose for what seems like the hundredth time that day and glances angrily at the tissue box. He turns over, flopping into the coolness of his pillow and groans softly, slamming a fist against the sheets. Nancy has called about three times, asking if he's feeling better, but he doesn't have the energy to answer her. He glances at his textbooks and the tutoring notes Jonathan has given him and curses as he remembers he has a session with him today. He tries to sit up, but his head swims and he curses loudly, flopping back to his pillows.

“Goddammit...”

God, he hates everything right now.

His mother keeps knocking on the door, but he keeps ignoring her, and he finds more snot dripping from nose as he thinks about getting something to eat. He knows she’s offered, but he can’t bring himself to go downstairs. He figures he’ll starve and die alone in his room and they’ll find him-

A knock brings him out of his thoughts and he turns toward the door.

“Mom, I’m fine. Seriously.”

“It’s me.”

He bolts upwards on the bed, ignores the swimming feeling again, and runs a hand through his sweaty hair.

“Jonathan?”

The door opens, and Jonathan pokes his head into the room.

“Hey. Can I um...”

“Yeah, yeah. Come in. It’s a mess in here, so don’t mind that.”

Jonathan enters the room and Steve sees he’s carrying books and papers and a plastic bag of something that smells really good and has seeped past Steve’s clogged sinuses.

“I brought your homework. Most of it’s chemistry, I think. But there’s some English in there, too. Social studies, history, you know.”

“Yeah. Thanks. You didn’t have to do that.”

Jonathan shrugs, setting down the bag and books on the desk.

“We’re in most of the same classes. Figured I’d bring them

over.”

Steve sits up against his pillows. He feels snot on his nose again and he growls, pulling another few sheets of tissue from the box and blows his nose.

“You look like shit,” Jonathan says, brow raised.

“I know, so kind of you to say.”

Jonathan pulls the desk chair over beside the bed, and sits down, letting his book bag drop.

“I also figured you wouldn’t be able to come to me today, so I thought I’d come to you.”

Steve tilts his head.

“I’m not gonna be much use today.”

Jonathan waves a hand.

“It’s fine. I can give you a run-down of it, that way you know what to expect when you come back.”

Steve nods, and listens as Jonathan talks. He likes his voice, even as raspy and odd as it is, and he finds himself enjoying it. Jonathan talks about classwork, and the lessons, but he also goes into things that happened in class that were funny. Jenny Lowenstein fell out of her chair while she was asleep in History, and Mike O’Dell got in a fight with Jake Woodward over the last piece of pizza in the lunchroom. Steve finds himself laughing at the way Jonathan tells the stories and he sees so much of Will in him. He thinks back to when Will outed Jonathan about playing Dungeons and Dragons and wondered how well Jonathan played, suddenly.

“You played Dungeons and Dragons, right?”

Jonathan pauses in his story, and nods. “Yeah, for a few years. Then I used to DM for the kids when they got started in it.”

“You must have been a good...what’s a DM again?”

Jonathan smiles, dipping his head, and Steve tilts his head, looking for the dimples. He wants to see them.

“Dungeon master. We controlled how the campaigns went and if attacks missed or hit. We did a lot of narration.”

“Ah. Yeah, you must have been good at that.”

Jonathan laughs a little. “Sure. Mike will tell you I was insufferable.”

“Gotta coral those trolls somehow.”

Jonathan laughs again, and Steve smiles at the sound. He likes it. Wants to suddenly hear more of it. But Jonathan is turning back to the desk. He pulls a container out of the plastic bag.

“I brought soup.”

“You brought soup.”

“I brought soup,’ Jonathan says again, and hands him the container.

It smells ungodly good, and Steve just sits inhaling it for a moment. He holds the hot container to his chest, letting it seep into his hands.

“What kind of soup?”

“Chicken noodle. Mom made it the other night. Thought you might like some.”

“I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Well, have at it.”

“Stop feeding me.”

Jonathan’s eyes go wide for a moment, before he laughs again and Steve grins when the dimples come out. Steve opens it, and the smell of a good chicken noodle soup waft up at him. He’s handed

a spoon and he digs in, reveling in the heat and immediately feels his sinuses start to clear up.

“Oh god, that’s good.”

Jonathan is unpacking the homework, setting it on the desk and pulls out his own books. He places Steve’s textbooks on the bed and waits for him to finish the soup, taking the container back after Steve’s drained it, forgoing the spoon to drink the rest of the broth. He feels pleasantly warm, finally, and picks up one of the homework sheets. Jonathan is already jotting notes down and writing answers and he calls them out to Steve.

They continue like this until Steve feels himself drifting off. He barely feels Jonathan take the books from his hands and he settles himself further down on the bed.

“Sorry,” he mumbles.

“Nah, man, you’re fine. Get some sleep.”

He feels the covers being dragged up over him and he slips an arm under the pillow. He feels a hand squeeze his shoulder and lightly rub at it for a moment, and then hears Jonathan pack up his things. He cracks open an eye, and sees him wave at him before leaving the room and closing the door.

Steve won’t admit it out loud, but he suddenly misses him.

He finds himself on the doorstep to the Byers’ house again for the second time in a few weeks, and he’s holding a textbook Jonathan forgot at his house and the soup container. He hasn’t gone back to school yet, and he’s only been recovered for a day or two, but he knows Jonathan needs the book and he can’t be responsible for him having bad grades, either.

The door swings open, and he’s greeted by a cigarette cherry, a waft of smoke, and Joyce Byers.

“Steve! Hi!”

“Hi, Mrs. B-“

“Joyce, Steve. We’ve talked about this.”

He laughs. “Joyce. Jonathan left a book at my house. I also came to return your container. Thank you for the soup. It was delicious.”

She raises an eyebrow, taking the items from him. “Soup?”

He feels himself still. “Jonathan said you made soup. And he brought some over.”

“I didn’t make any soup. OH! Wait! No, he did. The other night. I remember him making it. Good, right?”

Steve feels something warm settle in his chest and he nods.

“Yeah, very good. Hell of a cook.”

“He is. Always has been. Happy he didn’t take after me for that. Hey, I’m glad you’re feeling better. I’ll get the book to him.”

“Thanks, Joyce.”

“You’re very welcome, Steve. Tell your mom I said hi, okay?”

“Will do.”

He goes back to his car, and slides into the driver’s seat. He sits for a moment, then shakes his head, grinning.

Jonathan had made him soup.

4.

It’s not like Steve intentionally ended up here.

He’s sitting on the edge of a hospital bed in the Hawkins’

Memorial ER, fiddling with the IV line in his hand. His head is pounding, and he reaches up, feeling the bruise near his right temple.

Not intentional at all.

He sighs, leaning back on the bed a little. A doctor stops by to check on him, runs a light past his eyes, declares a mild concussion and pats him on the shoulder. He turns on the charm, smiling at a cute nurse that passes by, but he knows it comes off a little loopier than usual. Things are a little...swimmy right now, and he looks around the ER at other people, watching doctors and nurses flit past him.

“Do you have a ride, sweetie? We’re letting you out soon,” a nurse asks him, and he looks up.

“Uh, I...I need to make a call.”

She only nods, smiling at him, and takes the IV line out of his hand. She sets down an ice pack and instructions as to where the phone is, and he slides off the bed carefully. His head throbs wildly again and he grunts, wincing. He reaches out, sliding a hand along the wall to get to the phone and dials his parents’ house. There’s no answer. He dials the Wheeler home, and straightens a little as Nancy answers.

“Steve! Oh my god. Are you okay? I heard about gym class.”

He winces at the loudness. “Yeah, yeah. My own damn fault. Got in a fight with the volleyball net pole.”

“Jesus, Steve.”

“Yeah. Nothing major. Concussion, a scrape. Slap on the wrist.”

She laughs a little, a tinkling sound he’s always been fond of.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks. You wouldn’t be able to give me a ride home, would you? No one’s answering at Casa Harrington.”



"I wish I could. Mom's about to drop me off for debate practice. Have you tried Jonathan?"

He's taken aback by the question, and composes himself as quickly as he can in his state, which seems to be more than a minute when Nancy calls his name a few times.

"Steve?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm here. Jonathan? Why him?"

"He has off from work tonight, he told me. Maybe he might be able to pick you up?"

Steve flips through his memory for a moment, trying to remember Jonathan's number.

"You need the number, don't you?"

"If you have a minute, yeah."

He hears her moving on the other end, rustling some papers. He hears a book being opened and then, "Ready?"

He searches for a second, finds a notepad next to the phone and a pencil and gives her the go ahead. She gives him the number, and he stares at it for a moment, swallowing.

"Thanks, Nancy."

"You want me to come over later?"

"No, no. I'm okay. Just need a day or two."

She makes a soft noise over the phone. "If you're sure. Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

"I will. You're my girl, Nancy Wheeler."

"And you're an idiot, Steve Harrington."

She hangs up, laughing, and Steve holds the paper up to read the numbers, which are blurring a little. He grabs the phone again

and dials.

There's a few minutes where he panics that no one will answer, and then suddenly, a raspy voice answers the phone.

"Byers residence."

"Jonathan?"

"Steve?"

"Hi, yeah." He leans against the wall, trying to stay upright, but curses as he slides down a little. He rights himself, seeing a nurse smirking and ducking her head and he jerks his head at her.

"What's up?"

"I have an odd request."

"Every request is odd with you."

"Can it. I um-"

"Need a pick up at the hospital?"

Steve blanches. "How did you know?"

"I was there...remember?"

Steve curses, and suddenly his memory clears. He had been watching Jonathan in gym class when the pole had hit him, or he had hit the pole...he can't be sure, but he had been distracted, to say the least. He had been watching as Jonathan, surprisingly agile and quick, had managed to spike the ball over the net, despite the height of the net, and had seen him smile at him and duck his head as he moved back into position for the next serve. Steve watches the lines of his back and shoulders under the thin gray tee shirt, appreciating the slight muscles move as he cracked his knuckles and looked around. Steve had been watching him as he played, seeing him nervously anticipate the next serve and then move back to do a set on the ball and pass it to the next player. Steve's pretty sure that's when he walked into the pole. His memory offered him a brief glimpse of

Jonathan's worried face peering down at him and offering him a hand up.

"Shit."

"You went down pretty hard."

Steve messes with the hem of his gym shorts, and moves his fingers to twist in the collar on the tee shirt.

"Not my proudest moment, no."

"I'll come get you."

Steve straightens. "You're sure?"

"Yeah. I mean. Yeah." Steve feels relief wash over him and he twirls the phone cord for a second. "Gimme ten."

"Thanks, man."

"Yeah, it's. It's no problem. See you in a few."

"See ya," Steve offers weakly and hangs up. He goes to sit back on the bed, using the wall for support again and is handed his discharge papers and a bottle of painkillers. He's moved to sit up front in the waiting room, and he waits for the low revving of Jonathan's car. He's out of his seat the minute he hears, regretting the action immediately as the room takes a turn, and he sits back down. The doors open and a shadow falls on him. Steve sees a striped sweater in front of his face and a hand with thin fingers held out to him. He looks up, seeing Jonathan leaning down.

"Let's get you home."

He takes his hand, lets himself be pulled up. There's a hand on his back, guiding him toward the door, and he holds the ice pack to his head as he's seated in the passenger side. Jonathan only chuckles a little, starting the car and cuts the wheel to exit the lot.

"I can't believe you walked into a pole."

Steve feels his own grin starting at the ridiculousness, and he finds himself laughing along with him.

“Yeah, man. I don’t recommend it.”

“Concussion, then?”

“Mild. Nothing to worry about. I’ve had them before, and worse.”

“Jesus.”

Jonathan turns onto a residential street and Steve stares out the window as everything blurs.

“Worse? Really?”

“Yeah, had a hell of a concussion when I got beaned in ball one year. Wasn’t wearing the helmet, the pitcher had an insane arm, and I just happened to be in the line of fire. Wasn’t allowed to really sleep that night in case my brain melted or something.”

Jonathan laughs a little, shaking his head.

“You’re a mess, man.”

Steve smiles at him, looking at him as he drives. He sees him biting his lip as he gauges the intersection. He turns onto Steve’s street, and pulls up to his house. He parks, and pulls the keys out of the ignition. He turns to look at Steve, patting him on the shoulder.

“You need me to come in?”

“Nah, I got this.”

“You’re sure?”

Steve only nods at him, feeling the condensation from the ice pack under his fingers and he shakes the bottle of pills at him.

“I’m all set.”

Jonathan nods, sits back in his seat, and runs a hand through

his hair. Steve watches in slight fascination as the blonde strands slip through his fingers. Jonathan is looking at him carefully, lip back between his teeth, and brow slightly furrowed. Steve finds it vaguely adorable.

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

And then Steve, before he can stop himself-

“God, you’re cute sometimes.”

He slaps a hand over his mouth, shakes his head, and then waits for the reaction. He turns to look at Jonathan slowly, but finds him turned away. His shoulders are shaking, and when Jonathan finally turns to look at him, he’s laughing, eyes shut, and hand over his own his mouth. He’s flushed, and Steve holds his breath.

“Jesus Christ, Harrington.”

Steve, for the second time that day, finds relief washing over him.

“I’m sorry...I don’t...I don’t know-Wow. Just. Yeah. Sorry.”

Jonathan wipes a tear from his eye. Steve can’t recall a moment ever seeing him laugh that hard, and he’s oddly proud of himself for making it happen.

“Yeah, you’ll be okay. Jesus.”

Steve offers him a loopy smile, and then Jonathan is getting out of the car. He disappears for a second, and Steve thinks several minutes go by, and then he’s slipping sideways in the passenger seat as the door opens. He hadn’t realized he’d been leaning on it, and then strong hands are righting him.

“Don’t need a second concussion. Come on, Steve.”

He lets himself be pulled from the car, and wraps his fingers tighter around the pill bottle. The hand on his back from earlier is there again and he’s being gently pushed toward the front door. His backpack swings from over Jonathan’s other arm and he opens the

front zipper part, finding his house keys. Steve takes them, opening the door, and Jonathan pushes him into the house.

“Bed. Now.” Steve blows a raspberry at him, and Jonathan only rolls his eyes. “Can you do stairs?”

“I’ll live. I’ll slide up on my ass.”

Jonathan snorts and ignore him. “You go up first, I’ll follow. Make sure you don’t kill yourself.”

“That is really sweet of you. I appreciate that.”

Jonathan shoves at him lightly and his head swims again threateningly as he grips the banister. He settles himself when he feels two hands on his back, keeping him steady. He doesn’t know where the ice pack is and is suddenly in front of his bedroom door. He kicks at it weakly, and it slides open. He sits on the edge of his bed, and something cold presses to his head again. There’s a hand on his shoulder and he when he realizes his eyes have been closed, he cracks them open and sees Jonathan mere inches from his face.

“Just checking.”

“For what?”

“Making sure you don’t have any brain damage. Not that I’d really be able to tell.”

Steve weakly swipes at him, but Jonathan dodges it, grabbing his wrist. He sets it back on Steve’s lap, but he doesn’t move his hand. Steve thinks he feels a thumb running along his pulse and makes a soft noise, shutting his eyes again. He leans into the ice pack.

“These suck. I know.”

“You’ve had one?”

“Yeah. Had a major one when I was younger.”

Steve cracks one eye open. “What from?”

Jonathan seems to pale a little, and then shakes his head. “Nothing.”

He goes to pull away, but Steve grabs him by the arm.

“Something bad? You can tell me.”

Jonathan shakes his head again. “Just. Dad. Dad roughed me up one night. You remember that night, I’m sure. All the police and shit. Whole town knows about it.”

Steve thinks back to several years ago, remembers the police outside the Byers house, remembers Lonnie being brought out in cuffs, and how his parents had driven by slowly, making judgmental comments as they had seen a crying Joyce holding a toddler Will. He cringes as he remembers a much younger Jonathan sitting in the open doors of an ambulance, an EMT talking to him.

“Christ, man.”

“It was years ago. Things have changed a little, mostly for the better.”

Steve realizes he hasn’t let go of his arm yet. He yanks him a little closer, pulls him into a hug. It’s awkward, as Jonathan is leaning over him, but he feels his arms come up around him and Steve boldly presses his face into his neck.

“Thanks for picking me up.”

The arms around him loosen a little and one hand rubs at his back.

“Uh, yeah. It’s no problem.”

Jonathan seems to linger in the embrace for a moment, and Steve waits until he pulls away.

“Sorry, just-“

“Concussion, sure.”

“Yeah, that’s...chalk it up to that.”

Steve looks at him, sees him flushed again, and a nervous smile, maybe almost excited smile on his face.

It looks good on him.

Steve makes a show of flopping backward on his bed, and slides out of his shoes. He pushes himself like an inchworm up to his pillows and he hears Jonathan flat out giggling at him.

“All right. I’m gonna head out. I’ll see you in class in a few days?”

“Yeah. Again. Thank you.”

Jonathan nods, waving at him, and shuts Steve’s door.

Steve feels suddenly very warm, but in a good way, and he wriggles a little, hearing Jonathan start the car and pull away.

Before he slips into sleep, he pulls the ice pack up to his face, dry swallows one of the pills, and pulls a pillow close to his chest.

He presses his face into it, wincing a little.

But he can’t get rid of the smile.

5.

Nancy’s words echo through his head and he stares blankly at the soccer field in front of him. His hands are in his pockets, and his breath is fogging in the air. The brick behind his back is biting and he all he can think about is how nearly three years of Nancy have just been thrown out the window. There’s a hole in his chest now, and he bites back a curse as the wind whips around him. It’s overcast, and he can’t think of a better day for Nancy to have broken up with him.



He hangs his head, thoughts racing, wondering where he went wrong. But then has a realization that a *lot* of things had gone wrong, and they had simply, as she had put it, grown apart. Although, he also suspected it had something to do with the new guy, Billy and he curls his lips into a sneer.

Nancy and he had agreed to stay friends, and he couldn't have asked for a better outcome, now that he thinks about it.

But it still stings.

He fishes in his pockets for his lighter and cigarettes and fumbles to light one against the cold.

"Steve?"

A shadow comes over him and when he looks up, a Zippo is in front of his face, flame going, and he inhales as it meets the end of his cigarette. Jonathan is standing over him.

"I heard."

"Great. Whole school knows. Awesome. Fucking awesome."

Jonathan gestures to the concrete.

"Mind if I-"

"Knock yourself out."

Jonathan slips quietly to sit beside him, back against the wall. They sit in silence, and he sees Jonathan lean his head back against the wall. He wiggles the box of cigarettes at him, and Jonathan offers a hand. He haphazardly tosses the box of at him, and Jonathan takes one, slipping it between his lips and lighting it.

"Didn't know you smoked."

"I try not to."

Steve listens as he inhales, the crackle of the paper and the hissing of the burn, and then the breathless exhale. He feels a bit

better with him sitting next to him, and Jonathan presses a shoulder against his. Steve is silently grateful for the contact, and he leans into him a little. He watches as Jonathan taps the cigarette, ashes falling to the ground.

“I have something for you.”

Steve doesn't turn to look at him. He studies his own cigarette, taking another drag.

“My dignity?”

Jonathan huffs softly, exhaling smoke again, and goes to dig in his bag.

“I don't carry dignity around with me anymore, Steve, so I'm fresh out. But-“

He produces a small square glossy piece of paper and waves it in front of Steve. Steve takes the paper from him, and sees it's a photograph. It's a picture of Steve, from the night he had been over to Jonathan's for dinner. The night Will had dragged him into the house. It's a candid shot, but Steve finds himself staring at his own smile, and suddenly realizes he's never seen a picture of himself truly happy.

“I didn't think you actually took it...” he murmurs, running a thumb along the edge. He tries to avoid smudging it, but it's impossible with the gloss coating, and he turns to look at Jonathan.

“This is...huh. I...wouldn't you want to keep this?”

“I have the negatives. Can make another whenever I want.”

“You'll have to show me sometime...the whole darkroom thing.”

“Yeah. Whenever you want.”

They lapse into silence, Steve staring at the photo, and he sighs, feeling something uncurl in his chest. He sighs, putting the picture into his bag.

“So. I’m mad.” Jonathan only nods, so Steve continues. “Almost three years. Since the eighth grade. And she just...she had good reasons, I guess. Things weren’t working out. I mean. After the whole thing...and then *Billy* comes along...”

He sees Jonathan wince at the name. Steve had witnessed Billy slinging insults at him, shoving him into the lockers when Nancy wasn’t around.

“He’s a dick,” Jonathan mutters.

“Grade A.”

“I’m really sorry, man.”

Steve steels himself. “You know, there was a time where I was glad it wasn’t *you*. But now? Christ. I’d rather it had been you. If you and her had shacked up now, I’d be totally okay with it. Is that weird?”

Jonathan purses his lips, takes another drag, and shrugs.

“Nancy’s not...We’re friends, sure. But it would never have worked out.”

Steve looks at him, brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Jonathan just sighs, shakes his head. “We’re too different. She’s smart, goddamn gorgeous, one of the kindest people I’ve ever met, but...just. Don’t think she could handle it.”

Steve looks at him hard for a moment, then lets his head fall back against the brick.

“She said me and her were too different, too.”

“You’ve changed a lot, Steve. Maybe you changed to the point you guys grew out of each other. You two started pretty young.”

Steve lets the thought sink in. He finds himself agreeing with him, even if he doesn’t want to. He stares out as the soccer team runs

drills, firing the balls into the goal.

“You might be right.”

Jonathan only waves a hand. He stubs out his cigarette and Steve takes a final drag off of his own. He looks back out at the field. Jonathan starts chuckling a little, and Steve finds where he’s looking. He chokes out a laugh as some poor soul faceplants on the field, shoe flying off, and ball sailing over his head.

“Dammit, Evan. Kid was never good at running. Should have seen him in baseball practice. Barely knew which direction to run in.”

Jonathan laughs. “Which is why I don’t play.”

“You’re not bad in gym class, though.”

Jonathan turns to look at him, small smile on his face. “You learn to fake it.”

Steve shoves at him lightly, smirking.

“So what will the great Steve Harrington do now that he’s single?”

“Steve Harrington will be taking applications from potential singles around Hawkins.”

“That fast, huh?”

Steve laughs, shaking his head.

“Nah, just let it be for a while. If something comes along, then it comes along. Don’t really have my eye on anyone right now.”

He gauges Jonathan’s face, sees his eyes crinkle up as he grins, the wisps of hair floating in the breeze. He lets his eyes trail down the lines of his face, to the long dimples alongside the curl of his lips. He sees the small scar in one eyebrow and another near his chin, and wonders briefly where they came from. He realizes how much he wants to know him, and lets it sink in. He suddenly itches very hard to trace the dimples in his cheek and tightens his fingers in

his pockets.

“You’re welcome to apply, though.”

Steve realizes he’s said it too late. Jonathan sobers a little, flushing brightly. Steve stares at him, suddenly mortified.

“Well. I’ll be going-” he stutters, trying to stand.

“Sit down, Steve.”

He flops back down at the command. Fingers are plucking at his wrist and find purchase. They wrap around it and yank his hand from his pocket. They run down his wrist, into his palm, and finally, lace themselves through his fingers.

“I-“

“Shut up, Steve.”

He clams up, and then feels Jonathan pressing into his side. Nancy is suddenly a far off thought, and he seeks out Jonathan’s warmth. He looks around, sees if anyone’s watching, then tilts his head, carefully, slowly, until it’s on Jonathan’s shoulder.

“This is weird”

*“Shut up, Steve.”*

The fingers in his are playing with his own and Steve lets his eyes drift shut for a second. He can smell cheap laundry detergent on Jonathan’s jacket, and something sharp: the smell of darkroom chemicals, he realizes.

He jerks a little when he feels Jonathan tilt his own head to rest on top of his.

“Thanks for...talking to me. Being here. This,” he finds himself saying.

Jonathan offers a soft noise of agreement and tightens his grasp on Steve’s fingers. “You’re my best friend, man. Like. The

only real one I think I've ever had. Nancy was, I think, but you? Shit."

Jonathan rubs his cheek against his hair and sighs. "That's messed up, Steve."

"Right?"

They sit in silence, and Steve sees it getting dark. The soccer team has packed up and the field is empty. The lights have turned on outside the school. They don't move. He knows people coming out of the school can see the two of them, and he suddenly doesn't care. When the temperature begins to drop and he can feel Jonathan shivering, he pulls away gently.

"Should be getting home."

"Yeah. I have to make dinner," Jonathan says softly, but there's something different in his voice. Steve's hips and legs ache a little as he stands, back complaining from the position. He helps Jonathan up, and they come within inches of each other as Jonathan stumbles a little. Steve brackets him by the arms, holding on tightly to his biceps and Jonathan's hands come up to wrap around Steve's forearms. Steve swallows, then pulls him in tightly, wrapping his arms around him. He sighs contentedly as Jonathan buries his face in Steve's neck, hair drifting against his skin. He feels lashes against his neck and he presses his cheek against his head.

"I don't fucking deserve you, man."

A fist beats at his chest softly.

"You deserve it, Steve," comes the muffled response. He can feel short breaths against his neck and he loosens his grip on him, holding him out.

"No, I don't. But I can admit that. I...can deal with Nancy. I know we're all friends. And that won't change, but you. I don't fucking deserve you."

Jonathan searches his face, and for a second Steve sees *something* flicker over his features, something close to a mix of

sadness, maybe even...longing. He can't be sure. He places both hands on the side of his face, finally feeling the angular features and the sharp cheekbones beneath his hands. Jonathan doesn't move, but he shuts his eyes and leans a little into the touch. Steve leans in, kisses him square on the mouth, and then rests his forehead against his. The realization of what he's just done sinks in a moment later, but he doesn't have the energy to be worried about it.

"Sorry, I just...It's been a long day. I shouldn't have--"

He's cut off as Jonathan is kissing him again, this time a little harder, and Steve...

Steve flails. Recovers. Then pulls him in, and laughs against his mouth.

"This is such a mess," he manages.

"We both are. Might be why this feels like it makes sense."

"You're okay with this?" Steve asks, rubbing his thumbs along the soft skin by Jonathan's eyes.

"Yeah. I know it's weird...but. I don't know. I'm willing to try this, I think. I don't think I've been reading you wrong the last few months, have I?"

Steve stills, shakes his head, and shuts his eyes.

"No. It's...weird. I never thought...with you...or any guy...and Nancy...wow. I just. But you..." he struggles.

"Why me?"

He feels Jonathan tugging at his jacket sleeves. He presses his palms against his cheeks, finds his eyes and stares at him.

"Because you took the time, and you didn't ignore me, and you saw through the act, and just...you were fucking you, and even after the hell I put you through, you still stayed. After that monster bullshit, and being given all the shit handed to you...And you helped me, and dammit, that is why you."

When Steve opens his eyes, he sees Jonathan's eyes glistening a little in the shallow light.

"Christ, Steve."

"Yeah."

Jonathan leans up again, making up for the differences in their height and pulls Steve down to meet him. Steve presses his lips to his, and he sighs, runs a hand through the soft hair on the side of Jonathan's head, and he lets his hands burrow into it.

"I...slow. We'll take it slow," Steve whispers. Jonathan nods, fisting his hands in Steve's jacket and they pull away. He wraps an arm around him and gathers his bag, watching Jonathan do the same, a little more shakily, and he feels giddy almost. The events of the day still sting, but he's ready to face it now.

He wraps an arm around Jonathan's shoulders as they walk in silence to their cars.

When they part, Steve watches him go, smiling, and he can't shake the feeling that something very big is happening.

+ 1.

As it turns out, something big is happening.

Steve's stumbling through the woods nearly a year later, bat in his hand, covered in god only knows from that goddamn thing and Steve is *really* starting to be over the whole interdimensional creature bullshit and-

Screaming echoes through the forest. Something that catches and drowns under a sob.



“Fuck! GUYS!”

Steve starts to hurry faster through the forest, tripping over thick roots and colliding with trees. The leaves crunch under him and the bark bites at his hands. He starts calling out the kids’ names rapid fire.

“DustinMaxLucasMikeWillEleven!”

*Jonathan.*

He feels something cold settle over him and he starts to chant their names under his breath as he makes his way into a small clearing. Something darts past him and he stumbles, falling back. He watches as the blur runs off into the woods, and he looks up, seeing the red of Dustin’s hat. He climbs to his feet, jogs over to them. The screaming starts up again and he looks around wildly. He doesn’t see anything. It’s too dark to make anyone out, but a flashlight beam blinds him. He throws a hand up to shield his eyes as he comes closer.

“Guys?”

“STEVE!”

Dustin is huddled near Max, Lucas not far from them. He’s leaning against a tree, staring ahead. Max is clutching a wrench, and Steve sees the glistening tar that drips off of it. He’s oddly proud of her, and in the months that he’s known her, he feels slight vindication that she got in a hit on that *thing*.

He falls to his knees in front of them. He reaches out, pushes Max’s hair out of her eyes, and she looks up at him. She’s not crying, and the only sign of fear is the hitching of her breath. She looks more pissed off than anything else and Steve grins at her.

“Atta girl,” he whispers. “It’s over. Portals are closed. Everyone else is safe, right?”

She nods at him, sighs a little shakily. He reaches out, patting Lucas’ shoulder, who gives him a nod. Dustin grabs at his arm.

“Jonathan...”

Steve feels that chill return.

“Where?”

Dustin turns, looking over at a dark spot. More screaming starts up again, and this time, he hears voices. He darts up, breaking into a dead run and he jumps over a few roots he can see. He sees the dark jacket Mike always wears, and he sees Will next to him.

Steve drops to his knees beside him and Will turns, sobbing, and latches onto him. Steve pulls him against him. He looks at Mike, sees him giving him a desperate look.

“Steve...”

Steve looks down at his hands, and he finds all too familiar plaid and a black shirt. Jonathan is writhing on the ground under Mike’s hands and he leans forward as best he can with Will in his lap. Steve finds Jonathan’s face, streaked in black, eyes screwed shut, teeth grit, breathing hard. The shadows on his face give him a gaunt, pale appearance. He opens his mouth and a choked scream comes.

Steve recognizes it from earlier and he tightens his grip on Will.

“What happened? MIKE. TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED.”

Mike shakes his head, hands in his hair now and Jonathan is trying to turn over, trying to crawl away, sobbing now. Steve feels Will leave him and he and Mike grab Jonathan, turning him back over.

“It’s...it’s in him...Steve...It’s in him. It’s the last of it.”

Jonathan lets another hoarse scream escape, but Steve feels himself shiver as it winds down into a pained sob. He crawls forward, taking Jonathan’s face in his hands. His eyes open and Steve nearly falls backward.

They’re completely black.

Both eyes, entirely and completely black.

“Jesus.”

Hands rip at his clothing and he finds the thin wrists, taking them in his own hands. He looks at Will and Mike. Mike only shakes his head.

“What do you mean, ‘it’s in him?’”

Will grabs the hem of Jonathan’s shirt, carefully lifts it up, and Steve nearly chokes when he sees it.

Against the pale skin, the black tendrils creep halfway across his stomach, reaching up and wrapping around his ribcage. It’s glossy, sickly looking, and Mike lifts the shirt further. Steve can now see the entirety of the thing. It’s wide, runs under his back, and it seems to have burrowed a hole in Jonathan’s side. He notices Will and Mike’s hands are covered in the black substance. He leans closer to Jonathan’s side, sees that that the center is pitch black, and he notices some movement under the skin, the dark tendrils creeping further. The skin is raised where they are, and Steve gags, turning his head and retching.

Mike and Will lose hold of Jonathan and he tries to turn over again, throwing his arms out and trying to drag himself away. Steve grabs him this time, plants him firmly against the ground. Jonathan sobs, shaking his head.

“Get it out. Get it out. *Getitoutgetitoutgetiout...*”

Steve nods, runs a hand through Jonathan’s hair gently.

“We’re going to get it out. Just. Hold on, okay? For me? Do it for me. Do it for Will.”

Steve feels his own voice breaking. The black eyes find him again, but then shut under thin eyelids in pain. Something moves in the mass that’s attached itself to him and he screams again, arching under Steve’s hands, head thrown back.

“What do we do?” he asks quietly, cupping Jonathan’s cheek.

He's burning up under his touch and he feels fear taking over. He tamps it down.

"We need Eleven," Will says. His voice is strained, and Steve reaches out, rests a hand on the side of his head. Will snuffles loudly and grabs at Steve's wrist, holding it.

"Where is she?"

Mike only looks out to the woods. "She ran. She couldn't handle it. She ran."

Steve looks in the direction. He starts when a hand fists itself in his sweatshirt collar and pulls him forward.

"Castle..."

Steve waits, feeling Jonathan take a deep breath, teeth still grit against the pain. He falls back against the ground again, a low moan in his throat.

"BYERS. CASTLE BYERS!" Will starts.

Mike looks at Will, waving his hands, and then points Steve in the direction. "She goes there sometimes with us. She's probably there. But she's...I don't know. She's terrified. Steve."

Steve leans down to Jonathan, touches his cheek gently. "You're gonna be okay. Just hold on."

He presses his forehead against his, and Jonathan whimpers, clawing at him.

"You two stay here, make sure he doesn't move. I'm gonna find her."

He stands, feeling Jonathan's hands reaching for him, and he twines their fingers for a moment. He grabs his bat. He squeezes Will's shoulders, then Mike's, and follows the direction Mike had shown him.

He hears Jonathan's heartbreaking sobs get further away and

he takes a deep breath. He looks around the woods, seeing moonlight in broken rays against the trees. He goes deeper into the woods, and lets his eyes adjust. He sees something flap in the breeze and he trains his eyes on the small wooden structure.

Castle Byers.

He sees slight movement within and he makes his way carefully toward it.

“Eleven? It’s Steve.”

He pokes his head past the fabric, and recognizes the curly dark hair and the white sweater that he had seen fly past him earlier. She doesn’t raise her head, but she flinches at his voice.

“It’s okay. Can I come in?”

She does look up at that, and he sees the stained cheeks and the tears that have made trails in the black. He pushes into the small fort, and sits beside her.

“You okay?” She shrugs and Steve offers an arm. She sidles up next to him and he wraps his arm around her. “It’s over.”

She snuffles a little, wipes an arm across her face. Dirt cakes the sleeve, and he pulls her a little closer.

“Why did you run?”

“Scared.”

Steve nods. “I know, but we need your help out there.”

“Said it was over.”

She looks up at him, all huge brown eyes and impossibly too young for this shit, Steve thinks.

“Jonathan needs your help.”

Eleven glances away, and he sees her fingers tightly wrapped

in the denim of her overalls. He watches as she digs her feet under, and he briefly wonders where her shoes went.

“Grabbed me. Took them.”

Steve jerks. “You...read minds now. Okay then.”

“New.”

Her voice is still shaky, but she’s not shaking under his arm so much anymore.

“Jonathan needs you. We all need you out there. Do you think you can?”

“Jonathan...I don’t...I don’t know.”

Steve unwraps his arm from her and comes to sit in front of her.

“What’s wrong, El?”

She looks away from him, avoids his eyes. He searches for them, sees the tears falling again, and she shakes her head, shutting her eyes.

“Bad. So bad.”

“What’s bad, kiddo?” He pushes some of the curls from her face.

“Me.”

“Why are you bad?”

“What if I am?”

Steve knows since she’s been out of the Upside Down, her speech has gotten better, but he knows something has shaken her hard when she descends back into the brief replies. He can see her concentrating hard on how to express herself, and he waits.

“What if I turn bad? Like them.”

Steve bites his lip, and shakes his head at her.

“You know what superheroes are, right?” She nods. “Okay. So, superheroes have powers. Like you. And...you know the bad guys? Maybe they have powers, too.”

She’s staring at him, rapt, seems to be relaxing a little, and he continues.

“So, here’s the difference: superheroes use their powers to help people. Bad guys use theirs to hurt people. You’re a superhero. You know why?”

She shakes her head. He reaches out to wipe a tear from her cheek.

“Because all you’ve ever done for us is help us. And if that’s all you’ll ever do, you will *never* be a monster. Not like them. You’re one of the bravest kids I have ever met. You’ve been through a lot of...stuff. And not once, did you ever try to hurt one of us, intentionally. You get me?”

She nods. “I’m a superhero.”

“Damn straight you are.”

She gives him the ghost of a smile, and grabs onto his hands. “Jonathan.”

“He’s hurt really bad, El. One of those things is on him. We need your help to get it out. Can you help me with that?”

“Brother.”

Steve’s eyes widen. She touches his face lightly, and he feels something, some kind of weird buzzy feeling and he feels his panic fade for a moment. This must be something new as well, he realizes. Some kind of emotional manipulation.

He smiles a little, suddenly very happy how her powers are manifesting.

“Brother,” she repeats.

He nods. “For you, anything.”

She beams at him. “Jonathan, too.”

“He’s your brother?” Steve asks, laughing.

“All of you.” Steve smiles. “But...Jonathan is something else to you.”

Steve sits back. “He is. I care a lot about him.”

“Love?”

Steve chokes on a feeling rising in his chest. He looks back toward the clearing, feels his chest pull hard, and turns back when he feels her hand on his wrist.

“Let’s go.”

“That’s my brave girl. No shoes...so...How about you hitch a ride?”

He turns, kneeling, lets her climb on his back and he starts back toward the clearing. Jonathan’s screams have turned hoarse, taking on an almost animalistic sound. Eleven shivers on his back. She’s clutching tight to him, and his hands pulls her legs closer to him. She’s bony, lightweight, but the heft of the situation he knows is sitting on her mind. Her arms tighten around his neck and she buries her face into it.

“I’m good,” she whispers.

“You’re so good.”

She puts a hand on his chest and his heart slows a little, panic subsiding further, and a calmness sets over him.

“Is that new, too? You making people feel better?”

“Yes.” Then. “He’ll be okay.”



Steve swallows hard, nodding. She hugs him harder and he shivers a little as he steps back into the clearing. She slides down him, padding over to where Mike is stumbling over to her. Steve smiles as they hug, sees their eyes shut and he looks to Will, who's pinning Jonathan to the ground, speaking quickly to him. Steve drops to his knees on Jonathan's other side, in time to see him sputter and black foam curtains down his chin. He lets his head fall back, moaning softly. Steve uses his sleeve to wipe the foam from his mouth gently, then brushes his hair from his eyes. The heat from his skin is unnerving. He puts a hand on his chest, feels his heart hammering beneath his ribs, and he feels every hitch of breath. He's weakening, and Steve feels helpless. A shadow comes near them and he looks up, sees Eleven kneeling beside Will. Steve looks at her; he knows desperation is clear on his face.

"Hold him," she whispers.

He nods, taking both of Jonathan's wrists in his hand, and holds them near his head on the ground. He lays part of his weight on top of him and looks back at Eleven. He bobs his head, the go ahead.

He watches as she pulls the shirt up, Mike and Will beside her, each holding on to Jonathan. He sees something cross her face, and realizes it's determination. He sees her place a hand near the black mass, and he feels a dull pulse in the air around him. He sees the other boys look up, and knows they must have felt it.

Jonathan bucks hard under him, ripping his hands free while Steve is distracted and lets out an ungodly shriek. Steve throws a leg over his chest, bracketing him in and rests as little of his weight as possible on top of his chest. He looks over his shoulder.

"Is it working?"

"KEEP HIM THERE!" Will screams, coming to Jonathan's other side. Steve sees him sit his weight on top of one of Jonathan's kicking legs and Steve bears down when he tries to squirm out from under him again. He pins his arms again beside his head and presses his cheek to his. Jonathan gasps and writhes, crying out.

“Shhhh, easy. Easy, hey. Come on, Jonathan.”

Steve finds himself whispering platitudes, knowing it's falling on deaf ears.

He feels something wet against his cheek and he raises his head, seeing black and clear tears streaming down Jonathan's pale skin.

He looks behind him.

Eleven looks up at him. “Keep him still.”

And then plunges her hand into the black mass.

Jonathan's mouth opens in a silent scream, and Steve plants his shoulder against his lips. He feels sharp teeth sink into his skin and a sob muffled by his shirt. It hurts like hell, but Jonathan has stilled a little under him.

He lifts his head, gritting his own teeth against the pain, and presses his forehead against Jonathan's. He's still too hot, entirely too hot, and Steve feels his own tears starting to run from his eyes. He looks up again, feeling something tugging Jonathan's body under him. When he peers over his shoulder, Eleven is being hugged behind from Mike as she pulls hard at something, Mike aiding in the pulling. When he looks down, she's got some of the black mass in her hands. The tendrils are taut, still latched on under Jonathan's skin, but Eleven has several wrapped around her hands. Steve turns back to Jonathan, feeling him sob into his shoulder.

“Listen to me. Can you hear me?” Jonathan chokes on a raspy sob, but nods. Steve shuts his eyes. “Think of something else. Go somewhere else.”

“Where?”

Steve thinks for a moment, flips through the last nearly year and half of memories the two of them have had together. He finds one.

“Remember the first time I took you out?” Jonathan sobs

again, but Steve nuzzles his cheek for a second. “It was so bad. Remember? Car broke down, you got sick from the restaurant, your MOM walked in on us?”

He feels a hitch of breath, but then a short nod, and a huff of breath.

“So we never ate there again, we always ended up taking your car because you hated mine, and you had to start locking your door because your mom walked in on us with your head in the trashcan and one of your hands down my pants. That might have been the most awkward night of my life. We thought you were good. But nope. Not good. Decided you had to hurl during a handjob. And then your hand got caught in my belt and fly. Man.”

When he raises his head, Jonathan is still crying, breath still hitching, but there’s a curl of his lips. He looks back, sees Mike pulling Eleven back, and he feels the tug. They both nod at him. Will gestures at him to keep going.

“I know I haven’t said it yet, but fuck, Jonathan, the last year and a half have been the best fucking thing to ever happen to me, and I...fuck. I fucking love you, you weirdo.”

He presses a kiss to his forehead.

There’s another tug.

Another scream.

Steve presses his face to his, praying for him to pass out. Just to blessedly pass out for a few minutes.

And on the next tug, he does.

Steve breathes a sigh of relief and lifts his weight a little.

When he looks back, Eleven is standing, mass in her hand, stumbling a little. They all watch in awe as a light emits from it for a moment, and then the entire thing goes up in flames in her hands. She keeps her eyes on it, and then as soon as it had ignited, it crumbles, falling to ashes between her fingers. She looks at them as

she promptly crumples to the ground, awake, but barely.

“Safe now.”

Steve sits up, pulling himself off of Jonathan. There’s a light in the distance, and he hears a car. Minutes later, Hopper is running toward them. He stops by a tree, and Steve sees him usher the other kids into the cop’s car. He comes toward them, and kneels next to Steve.

“I saw your car. I’m glad you made it. And Dustin just told me. How is he?”

Steve looks at him, but pulls Jonathan into his lap, pulling him up against his chest.

“I’m not sure. Just want to get him out of here.”

He looks over to see Mike and Eleven leaning against each other, and Will holding onto Jonathan’s hand. Hopper removes his hat, runs a hand through his hair, and nods.

“I have everyone safe at the Wheeler’s. All the kids, Joyce, everyone.”

“I’m taking him home,” Steve whispers. “He’ll be safe there. My parents are away, won’t be any questions...mom’s a nurse, we have supplies...”

He knows he’s rambling. Hates the way he sounds right now, but Hopper gives him a hard look, and then nods.

“Okay. Just. Keep us updated. Need any help, call.”

Steve nods, pressing his face into the damp, sweaty hair under his chin.

“I will.” He feels Hopper squeeze his shoulder.

Steve watches as Hopper pulls Will away, and feels Will wrap his arms around both him and his brother. He leans into the kid, loosens an arm to hug him awkwardly.

“Take care of him, Steve.”

“Don’t worry, little man, I will.”

Will nods, and Steve sees Hopper placing a hand on his shoulder. Mike and Eleven are next in front of him, and he looks up just as Eleven hugs him, kneeling beside him for a moment.

“God, you did so good, kid. So good.”

She doesn’t say anything, just tightens her grip. She’s crying again, and when she pulls away, the blood under her nose tells a story of exhaustion. He kisses her head.

“Thank you. I mean, it, El. Thank you.”

He feels Jonathan stir in his arms and sees her reach out to his cheek. He’s still again in seconds. Steve feels her touch his own shoulder, and he feels calm settling over him again. He looks up as Mike slaps him on the back, hears the kid’s breath hitching as he and Eleven are pulled away. They all wait for him to stand, Hopper helping him as she shoves an arm under Jonathan’s knees and gets to his feet. He shakes his head, feeling the younger man weighs barely anything, and the toll of the last few months finally make itself known. Steve grips him tighter, following Hopper toward the light of the car. He finds his own still parked, and Hopper silently opens the door for him.

“Any help, any at all, you call me. You got that?”

“You got it, chief.”

Steve places Jonathan in the seat, buckles him in, and then slides into the driver’s side. He fumbles for a cigarette, realizes his hands are shaking and the adrenaline is finally winding down some. He drops the cigarette and his lighter several times before he gets it to light, and he sees Hopper pull away. He takes shaky drags, foot tapping the pedal, and glances around the woods. Hopper has put the bat in the back when he wasn’t watching and he’s grateful to have it back.

“You love me...”

Steve jumps, dropping his cigarette, and searches for it frantically as smoke wafts from the floor of the car. He finds the cherry, stamps it out, and then looks at Jonathan. The blond is tilting his head at him, and he's breathing shallowly, but his eyes are open and Steve feels relief flood him when he sees the black is gone. Brown shows clear, and are barely focused, but *they're his* and that is all Steve cares about.

He leans across the seat, cups his cheek and brushes his hair from his eyes.

"Christ. You have scared the shit out of me enough times tonight, Byers."

Jonathan gives him a weak smile, goes to find his arm, but misses and lets it fall to his lap. Instead, he just leans into Steve's touch.

"I heard it. Right before..."

Steve nods. "Yeah. You heard right."

He thumbs at the dirty skin of his cheek and pulls him closer, kissing him as gently as he can.

"I love you, you weirdo. God help me, I have no idea why, but I do."

He feels him smile against his mouth and he pulls away, looking at him. He seems a little less weak now, but he's still breathing harshly and starting to shiver.

"Let's get you home."

The struggle from the car to the steps to the upstairs of his house is one Steve doesn't want to remember, but once he has Jonathan situated on his bed, he goes for supplies and any medicine he can find. He sets everything down on his nightstand and flicks on the light. He sits him up, gets his shirts off and finds a clean tee of his own for him. He briefly wonders if they should both shower, and

looks at Jonathan who is barely able to keep his eyes open. He works him out of his jeans instead, and helps him slide into a pair of sweats and socks. He leaves the tee shirt off to the side, and pulls up the desk chair. He runs the back of his fingers down his cheek, feeling the heat still there, and grabs the glass of water and some fever reducer. He shakes out two, has him sit up again, and watches in silence as he takes them without a word. Jonathan falls back to the pillow, and Steve settles a damp cloth under his neck. Steve turns to the wounds, and tries to assess the damage as best he can.

The mass has left an incredible amount of bruising along his body, but further down, where Eleven had pulled it from under his skin, blood seeps from small slits. Deep rivets run along other parts, skin torn. He bites his lip, looks at the medical kit, and goes to work. He cleans him up, bandaging what he can and then helps him into the tee shirt.

He sighs, running a hand through his own hair. He strips off his tee shirt, and looks at the bite mark in the mirror. There's no broken skin or blood, and he touches it lightly, trying to gauge the bruise. He winces, and then turns to the bureau, digging for another shirt and then changes his clothes. He slides onto the bed with him, pulling him to curl against his side. He avoids the bandaged areas, careful of the bruising, and wraps an arm around the lowest part of his waist, nearly on his hip. Steve relishes in the feel of him, the fear of nearly losing him hitting him, and he knows Jonathan must feel the same, as he's tightening his own grip on Steve. He can barely move, but Steve feels like he's trying to get as close to him as possible.

"It came for me." His voice is raw, barely a whisper. Steve tilts his head to listen. "It. The head. It opened. Wrapped the petal... things...around my head. Something in my mouth...Tried to run..."

"Shh. It's over now. Everyone is safe. You're safe."

Jonathan whimpers a little next to him and Steve turns. Jonathan has his eyes screwed shut again, brow furrowed at the memory still. Steve tucks his chin on top of his head and rubs at his back.

“We’re all okay.”

*“I felt it moving, Steve.”*

Steve swallows, checks his side again just to be safe. “It’s gone, Jonny. It’s all gone. Eleven made sure of it. Just take it easy, kid.”

He swallows as he presses a cheek to his temple.

“Christ. You’re burning, up.”

Jonathan only shivers as Steve reaches for the cloth, pressing it to his forehead. They fall into silence for a moment, and Steve wonders if he’s fallen asleep yet. He reaches over, goes to turn off the light, but then stops, glancing around the room. He draws his hand back, instead curling it into Jonathan’s hair.

“Say it again, Steve...”

Steve opens his eyes, smiles into his hair.

“What? That whole declaration of love thing when you were in mortal danger? Which needs to stop, by the way, because that’s like the fifth time this year.”

A weak fist tightens in his tee shirt and he feels the slight shake of Jonathan’s shoulders. He thinks something’s wrong for a split second, then realizes Jonathan is laughing.

“Yeah. That,” comes the hoarse reply.

“I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. There. Happy?”

“I love you, too, Steve.”

He feels tears at his eyes for a moment, tightens his hold on him, and kisses the side of his temple. As Steve drifts off, he feels a hand on his cheek and a leg between his and the warmth of a body he’d never thought he’d ever have in his bed. He’s happy. He’s fucking happy, he realizes.



And until the next monster comes to Hawkins, he has all the time in the world to be that.

With Jonathan, right there next to him.